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Psychology Study Material: Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

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Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

- A psychologist born in Bronxville New York.
- Served as a professor at Harvard University.
- Started as a developmental psychologist in the early 1970s and became famous for his later work in moral education and moral reasoning.
- His theory emphasizes on how moral reasoning develops in stages similar with the theory of piaget's cognitive development.
- Like Piaget, Kohlberg believed that development is flourished by social interaction.
- Moral education can be taught in formal education by confronting people with moral dilemmas that evoke/arise cognitive conflicts.
- According to Kohlberg, discussion over these dilemmas promotes development, which further helps in higher stages of moral reasoning showing benefits of the higher stages of reasoning.
- He and others formulated dilemmas for this purpose.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Moral reasoning, which Kohlberg thought is the basis for ethical behaviour, has developmental stages. There are six identifiable stages of moral development. These stages can be classified into three levels.

Stages of Moral Development

Level 1

- Obedience and Punishment Orientation
- Self- interest orientation

Level 2

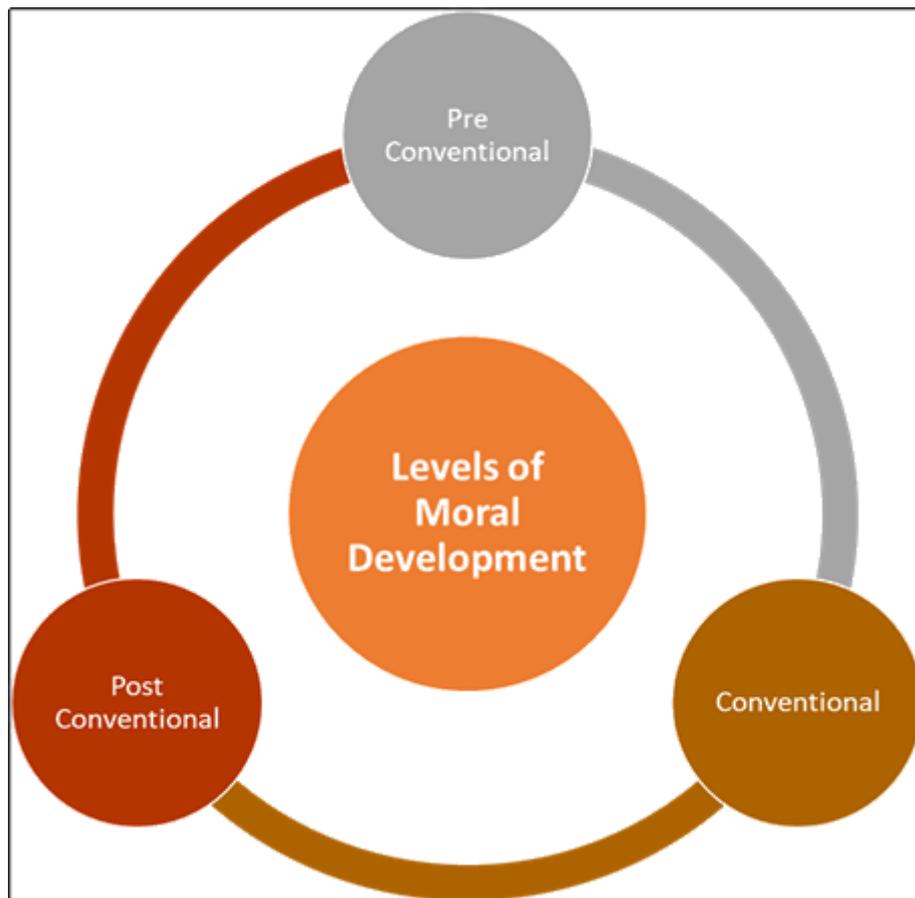
- Interpersonal accords
- Conformity (good boy/Good girl attitude)
- Authority

- Social order orientation (law and order morality)

Level 3

- Social contract orientation
- Universal ethical principles (principled conscience)

Levels of Moral Development



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Pre-Conventional

- Common in children, although adults can also exhibit this level of reasoning.
- Judging the morality of an action by its direct consequences.

- Pre-conventional level is divided into two stages:
- Stage One: Obedience and punishment orientation
- Stage two: self-interest orientation
- In stage one, individuals focus on the direct consequences that their actions will result into. They see and analyze as to what actions are morally wrong and, if the person commits them, gets punishment for it.
- In stage two, right behaviour is what is defined as, 'what is in one's own best interest' . Limited or little interest is shown about other's needs.
- Concern for others is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect.

Conventional

- Can easily be seen in adults and older children.
- Persons, who reason in a conventional way, judge the morality of actions by comparing these actions to social rules norms, standards, and expectations.
- The conventional level is divided into two further stages:
- Stage three: conformity orientation
- Stage four: law-and-order morality
- Individual, whose moral reasoning is in stage three, seeks approval from others. Tries to be a 'good boy' or 'good girl' , having learned that there is inherent value in doing so.
- Judging the morality of an action by evaluating its consequences.
- In stage four, individual thinks that it is important to obey the laws and social conventions because it is important in maintaining society and thus does not require approval which is important in stage three.

Post-Conventional

The post-conventional level is divided into two stages:

1. Stage five: social contract orientation
 2. Stage six: principled conscience
- In stage five, people have certain principles or beliefs to which they may attach more value than laws e. g. human rights or social justice.
 - In the sixth and final stage, moral reasoning is based on the use of 'abstract reasoning' using 'universal ethical principles' .
 - Although Kohlberg insisted that sixth stage exists, but he had difficulty finding people who used it. It appears that people rarely use it, if, ever they reach this sixth stage of Kohlberg's model.

